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Telling ELT Tales out of School

Similarities and differences between female and male learners: Inside and outside class autonomous language learning activities

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Abstract

The present study attempted to unravel whether female and male learners differed in terms of autonomous language learning activities they adopted both inside and outside the class. In order to determine the similarities and differences between the genders, a Likert-type questionnaire consisting of twenty-one items was administered to 80 seventh grade primary school learners. The end-of-the year achievement grades of the female and male learners were also analyzed to shed light on the questionnaire results. Additionally, an interview was held with the English teacher of the learners in order to obtain insights regarding the learners' autonomous behaviors. The analysis of the relevant data yielded somewhat similar results for both female and male learners.

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Key words: Autonomy; gender; similarities; differences; language learning activities

1. Introduction

This descriptive study aimed to explore similarities and differences between the female and male learners, specifically in terms of their inside and outside class autonomous language learning activities in a state primary school. The study focused on the most and least commonly employed autonomous learning activities, the activities that were equally used by both genders, and the specific activities that differed between genders. The study exploited a 5 point Likert scale questionnaire, the options being 'always', 'often', 'sometimes', 'rarely' and 'never', in order to elicit the learners' related responses on their autonomous learning activities.¹

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1.1. Autonomy and Gender

There has been a noteworthy growth of interest in the theory and practice of autonomy in language teaching and learning in recent years (Benson, 2007). Holec (1981, p. 3) defines autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” and elaborates on it as follows:

To take charge of one’s own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.: determining the objectives; defining the contents and progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition; evaluating what has been acquired.

Nunan (1988) argues that it is not absolute that all learners will develop autonomy in the same way and to the same degree. He asserts that there are degrees of autonomy, and to what extent learners develop it depends on many factors like the personality of the learner, the goals of language learning, the philosophy of the institution and the cultural context where learning takes place. Benson (2001) claims that although we cannot observe learners’ capacity to control their learning, we can observe the exercise of it. The researchers can, for instance, observe whether students participate in classroom decisions, reflect upon learning or initiate exchanges in the target language.

Although traditionally females and males are assumed to have different abilities regarding language, language learning and different analytical and mathematical skills, recent research studies have begun to refute this mainstream thinking. For instance, in relation to girls’ and boys’ self-conceptualization, Marsh, Byrne and Shavelson (1988) demonstrated that girls had a high self concept of verbal skills and high achievement in terms of verbal skills, while boys had only a high self concept of mathematical skills but low achievement. Nevertheless, the mainstream research focusing on the relationship between genders and second language learning has proved some differences between sexes. In their study of females’ and males’ attitudes toward second language learning, Gardner and Lambert (1972) observed that not only females had more positive attitudes toward the speakers of a second language but also they were more motivated toward learning a second language than males were.

Green and Oxford (1995) investigated the effects of gender and proficiency level on strategy use of EFL students. They found that learner strategies were used more by women than men, and more among successful language learners. Fourteen strategies were used significantly more often by women in this study, although only one was used significantly more often by men: watching television programs and video movies in English. Ehrman and Oxford (1989) also discovered significant gender differences in favor of women in terms of general study strategies, strategies for authentic language use, strategies for searching for and communicating meaning, and metacognitive or self-management strategies. Arabski (1999) also investigated the gender differences in language learning strategy use in a pilot study with 60 students and found out that the girls differed in their strategy use with regard to finding out about language learning, asking for correction, keeping English diaries, watching TV show and movies in English, starting conversations in English and looking for opportunities to speak in English.

To the best of our knowledge, however, there has not been any research directly focusing on learner autonomy and gender. This study, therefore, attempted to explore the autonomous behavior of the female and male language learners. It focused on the similarities and differences between both genders in terms of autonomous language learning activities they adopted both inside and outside the class.

2. The Study

2.1. Participants and Setting

This study involved 80 participants from 4 seventh grade classes of a public primary school; half of them were female and the other half male. These learners had been learning English for three and a half years and they shared the same language teacher. The learners had 4 hours of English a week and they could read, write, listen and speak at a beginner level. According to the regulations of the Ministry of Education they were expected to reflect their knowledge of English in creative ways in their assignments and projects.

2.2. Data Collection Instruments

In order to find out the differences between the males’ and females’ inside and outside class autonomous language learning activities, the fourth section of a questionnaire developed by Chan, Spratt and Humphreys (2002) was used. The questionnaire was administered to all four classes, it should be noted that due to the beginner level of the participants, some questionnaire items were removed and some were reworded. The Turkish translations of the

items were also provided in the questionnaire in order to secure the reliability of the students' responses, as can be seen in Appendix 1.

The items in the first part of the questionnaire aimed to elicit the male and female learners' responses on their inside class autonomous language learning practices. Specifically the items were related to how often the learners asked questions to their teachers when they did not understand, noted down new information, made suggestions to the teacher about language learning activities they could do in class, took opportunities to speak in English and try new things in class activities. The items in the second part of the questionnaire aimed at obtaining the participants' responses in relation to their outside class language learning activities like doing assignments that were not compulsory, reading books or magazines in English, listening to songs in English, watching English movies, etc.

Additionally, an interview was conducted with the classroom teacher to get a more in-depth understanding of female and male learners' autonomous language learning activities. As a last data collection procedure, the end-of-the year academic grades of the learners on the English course were collected from the school in order to compare with the questionnaire and interview data and obtain a more comprehensive picture.

2.3. Data Analysis

The questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS 16. The frequencies of the female and male learners' responses were computed in the Crosstabs. In order to ease the analysis process, the data related to the 'always' and 'often' sections, as well as 'rarely' and 'never' sections of the questionnaire were computed together. Afterwards, in order to decide whether the differences between the genders were significant, an independent sample t-test was administered. Moreover, the means of the end of the year grades of all participants were calculated and the significance of mean differences was analyzed using a t-test. The English teacher of the four classes was also interviewed in order to gain a deeper understanding of the learners' autonomous language learning attitudes. This also enabled the researchers to triangulate the data.

3. Results

3.1. Similarities

Table 1: Similarities between females and males

Rank	Number	Item	Mean difference	P value*
1.	9	I read English notices around me.	.25000	.879
2.	3	I make suggestions to the teacher about language learning activities we can do in class.	.10000	.577
3.	18	I use the Internet in English.	.10000	.572
4.	15	I study English with friends in self-study groups.	.12500	.512
5.	17	I write a diary in English.	.12500	.404
6.	19	I do revisions not required by the teacher.	.25000	.290
7.	20	I collect texts in English (brochures, articles, etc.).	.20000	.280
8.	16	I watch English movies.	.22500	.254
9.	10	I read books or magazines in English.	.22500	.215
10.	12	I listen to songs in English.	.20000	.183
11.	1	I ask the teacher questions when I don't understand.	.25000	.105
12.	21	I go to see my teacher outside class about my work.	.32500	.074
13.	14	I practice using English with friends.	.35000	.052

Independent samples t-test results (*p<.05)

As this table illustrates, in relation to 13 of 21 autonomy-related items, the female and male learners provided similar responses, outweighing their different responses. Item nine ('I read English notices around me') seemed to be the most similar autonomous activity in accordance with the sample t-test analysis. Comparison of the frequency of the related responses showed that 60 % of the male and 55 % of the female learners chose the "always-often" option, which seemed to indicate that more than half of the learners paid attention to English notices, like signs, pamphlets, TV or radio broadcasts, internet notices around them. For the second most similar item, 3 ('I make suggestions to the teacher about language learning activities we can do in class'), 30 % of the males and 28 % of the

females reported that they always/often did it, thus suggesting that in general they did not assume a very active role in the choice of language learning activities. For item 12 ('I listen to songs in English'), 70 % of both female and male learners opted for the "always-often" option which seemed to indicate another similarity. Yet another similarity was evident for item 1 ('I ask the teacher questions when I don't understand') for which 62 % of the girls and 46 % of the boys preferred the "always-often" option. This finding was supported by the classroom teacher who expressed during the interview that the female learners tended to ask for more clarifications throughout the lessons compared to the males.

On the other hand, the "rarely-never" option was the most frequent one for item 18 ('I use the Internet in English') for 60 % of the male and 52 % of the female learners which seemed to indicate that the learners did not prefer using the internet in English which could provide a learning environment for them. Another similarity was evident in item 15 ('I study English with friends in self-study groups') since 42% of the males and 38% of the females opted for the 'rarely-never' option. As regards item 17 ('I write a diary in English'), overall most of the learners, 75 % of the male and 68 % of the female learners reported that they rarely/never did it which suggested their reluctance to use writing as a language learning activity.

Another similarity was observed for item 20 ('I collect texts in English', brochures, articles, etc.) with a total of 30% of the responses clustering around the "sometimes" option. However, in relation to the same item 50 % of the male and 37.6 % of the female learners preferred the "rarely-never" option. Although the negative responses for item 19 ('I do revisions not required by the teacher') showed some similarity, 51.2% of the participants preferred the "always-often" option. While 62.4 % of the female learners reported always-often doing revisions, only 40 % of the male learners did it. Interestingly, almost the same number, 28 % of the boys, and 25 % of girls chose the "rarely-never" option in relation to this item.

45 % of the males and 35 % of the females reported rarely-never watching English movies which might be due to different perspectives on education. Since most learners in Turkey see learning, especially language learning, as a classroom issue, making use of other opportunities, such as watching movies in the target language may not be regarded as a rewarding language learning activity. However, it could also be related to their language level as these learners were beginners and they might not have enjoyed watching movies or even might have got frustrated if they could not comprehend them. Some similarity was also observed between the girls and the boys in terms of item 10 ('I read books or magazines in English'). Again most of the related responses, from 45 % of the males and 35 % of the females, clustered around the "rarely-never" option, which seemed to indicate that the participants tended to ignore reading books in the target language as a learning activity.

Although the results of t-test analysis for item 21 ('I go to see my teacher outside class about my work') did not suggest a significant difference between the genders, the value $p=.074 > .050$ was worthwhile to consider. While 48 % of the girls chose the "always-often" option for this item, only 28% of the boys did so. The insights obtained from the interview with the classroom teacher were in line with this finding since she pointed out that it was usually the girls who came to ask questions to her during break times. In this regard, another item worthy of consideration was 15 ('I practice using English with friends') since only 18 % of the boys reported always-often practicing English with friends; however, 40 % of girls reported making use of this autonomous learning activity.

3.2. Differences

Table 2: Differences between females and males

Rank	Number	Item	Mean difference	P value*
1.	5	I try new things in class activities.	.57500	.001
2.	6	I study English grammar on my own.	.45000	.001
3.	7	I do English assignments that are not compulsory on my own.	.45000	.004
4.	8	I note down new words and their meanings.	.25000	.011
5.	4	I take opportunities to speak English in class.	.37500	.014
6.	11	I watch English TV programs.	.45000	.019
7.	13	I talk to foreigners in English.	.45000	.020
8.	2	I note down new information.	.15000	.044

Independent samples t-test results (* $p<.05$)

A significant difference emerged in relation to 8 activities and all of them were used mostly by the female group. The girls outperformed the boys in trying new things in class activities, with a significant difference ($p=.001$). While 68 % of the girls opted for the “always-often” option, only 36 % of the boys reported always or sometimes trying new things in class. 26 % of the male learners’ responses clustered around the “rarely-never” option, with only 6% percent of the girls choosing this option. The English teacher of the four classes also expressed that the girls suggested new types of activities in addition to the ones offered by the teacher. They especially devised new vocabulary games and role-play activities. They included the boys in their activities too, but usually the girls were the ones who proposed to try new things.

Analysis of the responses for item 6 (‘I study English grammar on my own’) also yielded a statistically significant difference in the t-test results ($p=.001$). 31 of 40 girls (78%) reported always or often studying English on their own, while only 17 boys (42%) opted for the same option. Likewise, the girls also did the English assignments that were not compulsory on their own more often than the boys. Interestingly, while only 1 girl stated that she rarely or never did the non-compulsory assignments, 10 (26%) of the boys reported doing so. Most of the girls’ related responses (58%) clustered around the “always-often” option. The English teacher expressed that the girls studied grammar more regularly and they came up with new grammar points they discovered, and asked those to her if they had difficulty in understanding. She also shared that the girls were more willing to do the non-compulsory tasks. Further they usually asked to do more in relation to the assigned work. The girls wanted to make posters of the subject, created new role-plays and even wrote poems and songs with the words they had learned. On one occasion the teacher asked the learners to download the European Language Portfolio from the webpage of the Ministry of Education and try to do the assignments appropriate to their level. She stressed that it was mostly the girls who came with their portfolio each week and told her which assignment they wanted to do. They volunteered to write poems, postcards and letters on their own, tried to create opportunities to talk to foreigners and read books suitable for their level,

Furthermore, all female learners (100%) and 82 % of the male learners reported always or often noting down new words and their meanings. The English teacher expressed that all of her learners had vocabulary notebooks to note down new words and their meanings; however the girls produced more work in this regard. They had colorful vocabulary notebooks, with example sentences and pictures of the new words. Some girls even drew some comic strips in their notebooks, trying to use the words in speech bubbles. Although most of the boys also had vocabulary notebooks, not all of them kept them regularly and they usually wrote only lists of the target words with their related meanings. Moreover, another significant difference emerged between the girls’ and boys’ responses in relation to item 8 (‘I note down new information’), with all the female learners and 82% of the male learners opting for the “always-often” option.

Another item with a significant difference in the participants’ responses was item 4 (‘I take opportunities to speak English in class’). While the majority of the girls (58%) preferred the “always-often” option, the majority of the boys (46%) chose the “sometimes” option. More boys (20%) reported rarely or never doing so, whereas only 5 % of the girls reported taking speaking opportunities in class. The English teacher supported this finding by saying that the girls liked trying new expressions they had learned and they used classroom language related expressions like ‘May I ask a question?’ or ‘What does it mean?’ more willingly.

As regards items 11 and 13, the significance value of difference is somewhat similar. The girls (42%) reported always or often watching English programs and talking to foreigners in English more often than the boys (20 %). The English teacher also shared that the girls tried to find more opportunities to talk to foreigners who visited some school competitions and cultural events. The mean of all of the learners’ ($N=80$) achievement grades was 70 ($SD=17.8$), the mean for the female learners’ end of the year grades being 73.5 ($SD=17.3$) and

the mean for the male learners' end of the year grades being 65 (17.6). T-test of the difference between these grades revealed significance value of .027, which seemed to indicate that the girls outperformed boys in their school studies.

4. Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the present study demonstrated interesting similarities between the female and male learners' autonomous behaviors in relation to 13 of 21 questionnaire items. Reading English notices around, making suggestions to the teacher about in-class language learning tasks, doing revisions not required by the teacher, collecting texts in English and listening to songs in English were the most commonly used autonomous language learning activities by both genders. As regards the differences between the girls and boys in their preferences for autonomous activities, the females seemed to take more opportunities, especially in trying new things in class activities, studying grammar on their own, doing non-compulsory assignments, and noting down new words and their meanings. Therefore, the girls seemed to behave more autonomously in and out of the class.

Further, the female learners seemed to benefit from the opportunities of learning English more than the male learners. This finding also suggested their autonomous learning behavior since they independently made related decisions. For instance, they would decide to talk to foreigners or watch English TV programs on their own. Therefore, this finding seemed to indicate that the girls were more involved in decision making process related to learning than the boys. Furthermore, the female learners seemed to be more intrinsically motivated to learn English than the male learners. These results were also in line with the insights of the English teacher and the overall achievement grades. Throughout the interview, the English teacher reiterated that the girls were more active in the classroom and they took initiatives to learn the language both inside and outside the class. They were also more willing to take responsibilities for language learning. The achievement grades also supported these results since the girls' achievement grades were significantly higher than the boys' grades.

Pedagogical implications of this study are as follows. Language teachers should enhance their learners' opportunities of taking responsibility for learning English autonomously. However, any attempts at promoting learner autonomy need to be carefully considered since although students may be involved in autonomous language learning activities in the language classroom, teachers still need to assign some responsibilities to learners and guide them as to how to make use of the opportunities of using English outside the class as well.

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Appendix

Learner's Inside and Outside Class Autonomous Language Learning Activities

Dear Students,

As Master's students at Boğaziçi University, we are conducting a survey to find out primary school students' inside and outside class autonomous language learning activities. We want to inform you that your data will be used for research purposes only.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sinem Yılmaz & Burcu Varol

Değerli Öğrenciler,

Boğaziçi Üniversitesi'nde master öğrencileri olarak ilköğretim öğrencilerinin sınıf içi ve dışı özerk dil öğrenme etkinlikleri hakkında bir araştırma yapıyoruz. Elde edilen veriler hiçbir şekilde başka bir amaç için kullanılmayacaktır. Katılımınız için teşekkürler.

Sinem Yılmaz & Burcu Varol

Class/Sınıf:

Sex/ Cinsiyet:

ACTIVITIES

Inside Class:

İngilizce derslerinde ,	Always Her zaman	Often Sık sık	Sometimes Bazen	Rarely Nadiren	Never Hiçbir zaman
1. Anlamadığım zaman öğretmene sorular sorarım. I ask the teacher questions when I don't understand.					
2.Öğrendiğimiz yeni şeyleri defterime not alırım. I note down new information					
3. Sınıf içinde yapabileceğimiz etkinlikler konusunda öğretmene önerilerde bulunurum. I make suggestions to the teacher about language learning activities we can do in class.					
4. Ders içinde İngilizce konuşma fırsatlarımı değerlendiririm. I take opportunities to speak English in class.					
5. Ders içindeki etkinliklerde yeni şeyler denerim. I try new things in class activities.					

Outside Class

Sınıf dışında,	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
	Her zaman	Sık sık	Bazen	Nadiren	Hiçbir zaman
6. Kendi kendime İngilizce dilbilgisi çalışırım. I study English grammar on my own.					
7. Ödev olmasa da kendi kendime İngilizce çalışmalar yaparım. I do English assignments that are not compulsory on my own.					
8. Yeni kelimeleri ve anlamlarını defterime not ederim. I note down new words and their meanings.					
9. Çevremdeki İngilizce yazı ve levhaları okurum. I read English notices around me.					
10. İngilizce kitap ve dergi okurum. I read books or magazines in English.					
11. İngilizce televizyon programları izlerim. I watch English TV programs.					
12. İngilizce şarkılar dinlerim. I listen to songs in English.					
13. Yabancılarla İngilizce konuşurum. I talk to foreigners in English.					
14. Arkadaşlarla İngilizce pratik yaparım. I practice using English with friends.					
15. Arkadaşlarla çalışma grubu kurup İngilizce çalışırım. I study English with friends in self-study groups.					
16. İngilizce filmler izlerim. I watch English movies.					
17. İngilizce günlük yazarım. I write a diary in English.					
18. İnterneti İngilizce kullanırım. I use the Internet in English.					
19. Öğretmen söylemese de İngilizce dersini tekrar ederim. I do revisions not required by the teacher.					
20. İngilizce yazı, broşür, vb. toplarım. I collect texts in English (brochures, articles, etc.)					
21. Çalışmalarımı göstermek için sınıf dışında öğretmenin yanına giderim. I go to see my teacher outside class about my work.					

adapted from Chan, Spratt and Humphreys (2002)

Thank you for your cooperation.